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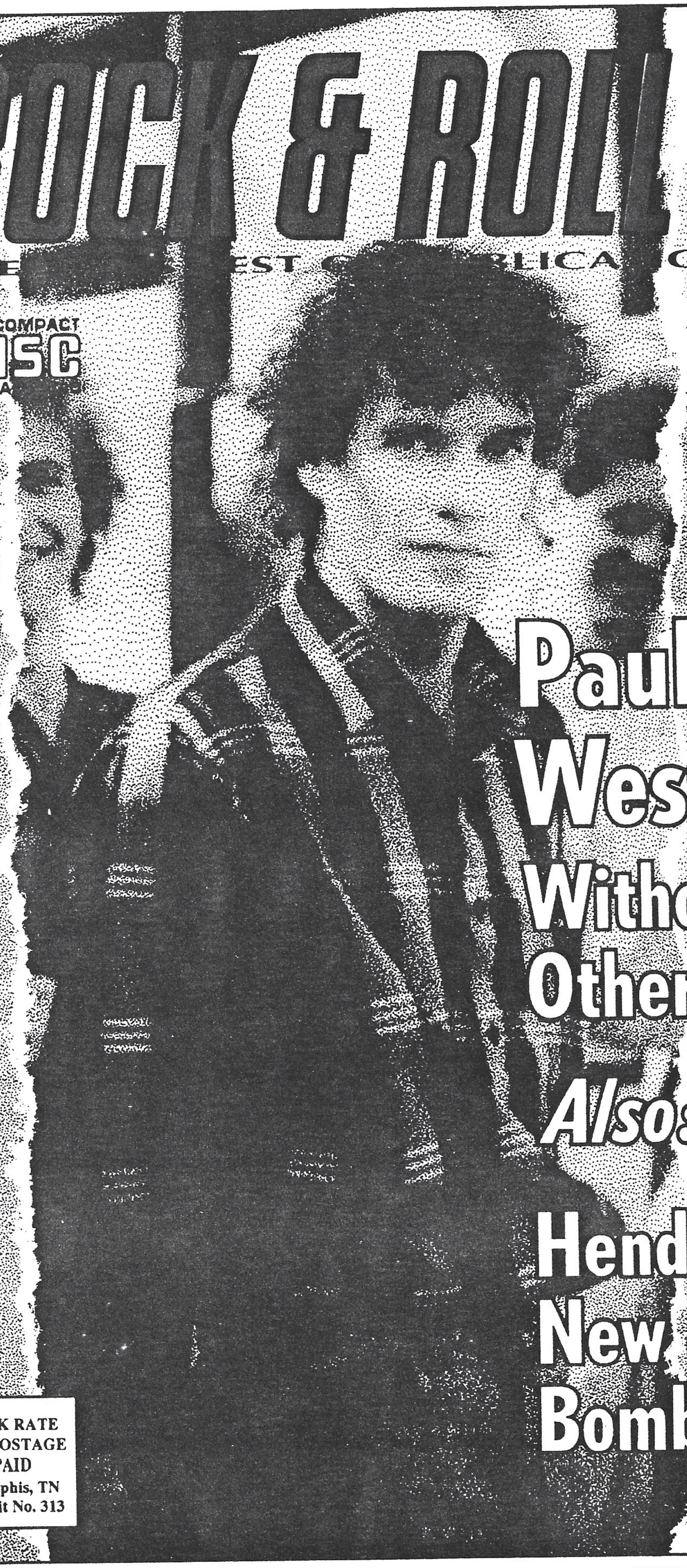

Paul Westerberg Without Those Other Guys

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Down To The Mat

Paul Westerberg Alone

Interview By Danny McCue

All I knew, an hour before this interview with Paul Westerberg was to take place, was that I had to get a whole new set of questions together.

"Haven't you read the latest issue of *Rolling Stone*?" a friend asked as I prepared last minute notes for the interview. "The Replacements have broken up."

That's about the last thing I needed to hear at that moment.

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From their meager beginnings -- their first gig was in the basement of a Minneapolis church -- the Replacements, or the Mats, as fans call them, have been allowed to indulge in brazen sloppy drunkenness and still come off as one of the more intelligent of the post-punk American bands. In their concert setting they've been both reviled, for tiring of songs and cutting them off mid-verse, and revered for their raw playing and devil-may-care attitude.

Their albums, by turns arrogant and self-deprecating, have illicited an equally strong and diverse response. Though the likes of *Hootenanny, Tim, Let It Be*, and *Pleased To Meet Me* have been just the sort of works, filled with crude beauty and passion, that cause critics to elbow their way to the bar to call the band darlings, dissenters simply consider the band punk throwbacks.

Now comes *All Shook Down,* as close to a completely acoustic album as guitarist, lead vocalist, and unofficial leader Paul Westerberg and company have ever attempted. Its thematic territory encompasses rebellion, love, hate, sex, destiny, and denial. Reviews run, predictably, hot and cold. But following the most commercial album of their career, *Don't Tell A Soul,* would seem a no-win proposition anyway. The act itself turned into a kind psychological crossroad for the band despite a straightforward approach to recording. And it would put the band's leader through some fairly major changes.

As I waited for Westerberg I thought about all this -- and started rephrasing some of the questions I'd scratched onto a yellow legal pad a few days earlier. Some I dropped altogether. In the end this turned out to be one of those "good guy" interviews of Paul's, with him being honest, easy-going, and direct. Days later drummer Chris Marrs announced that he was amicably parting company with the Mats. Meanwhile the rest of the band was preparing for an upcoming tour.

--Danny McCue

Rock & Roll Disc: When you were recording *All Shook Down*, was it technically a very conscious effort, or was it more a case of letting the tape machine eavesdrop on the band?

Paul Westerberg: We used less of our brains this time. And that goes all the way from the writing of the songs, which was instinctive, to the recording. We didn't sit and think, on a song like "Nobody," "Why does it sound good?" It just *felt* good and we left it as it was. It didn't have any electric rhythm guitar, and that probably has something to do with it. Eavesdropping is the wrong word, because we did construct the songs from the ground up, one instrument at a time, but we didn't use a lot of mental energy. It was more just what felt right.

R&RD: That's interesting because it seems like people perceive you spending more time on your songwriting. Is that process just becoming easier for you?

Westerberg: I don't know if it's coming easier; I just don't waste time on something I'm uncomfortable with. And there are certain styles of music that I flirt with, that are fun to do, but I don't kid myself into thinking I can pull it off. I stick with kind of what I do best.

R&RD: Do you have any ready examples of that?

Westerberg: Stuff like "All Shook Down," the song in particular. I mean, I like music like that, I don't know what you'd call it, but I have lots of things like that and I just didn't want to do too many of those this time. Because those are definitely mood pieces, where it's like, if you can capture the mood, that's all you can ask for. If there are mistakes, that's irrelevant. I think my strong suit lies with, maybe, lyrics that are better than run-of-the-mill and fairly simple melodies.

R&RD: You produced this album with Scott Litt. How do you guys work? Do you alternate roles? Play good cop/bad cop...?

Westerberg I guess I kept it closer to the gutter when he would try to pull it closer to the right. If he would've had his way, it would have been a little glossier and a little more high-tech, and we just kept each other in check. He would be sampling things and we would use maybe one or two things, but I wouldn't let him play with his toys too long because I would get bored. It worked well that way. I mean, I wanted things to sound good, but not at the expense of having people, me specifically, sit around and wait for him to have his thing done.

R&RD: Are the different roles that you play on a record -- musician, songwriter, producer -- clearly defined, or do they all kind of run together?

Westerberg: It does flow together, and I think that this is the first time that I've followed up from the first day of sitting down and writing a few words on a piece of paper and writing a song to choosing someone to work with, recording, and being there for the mixing and the whole bit. Lots of times I would go half way; I would write the song and maybe rehearse with the band, lay the stuff down and then kind of leave it up to other people to turn it into what I wanted it to be, which was kind of what happened on *Don't Tell A*

Soul, and it didn't turn into what I'd envisioned.

R&RD: How do you get your chops together, both as a singer and a musician, before you go in and record an album?

Westerberg: I don't do anything. Right now, had I the chance to do [the album] over, I would do things differently. I've never been one to warm up, and a lot of that is through, I guess, once or twice being very lucky when we were cold and got something instintive, rather than having rehearsed it. I don't like rehearsing a song, but it does help to warm your voice up or to warm your fingers up, and I would never do that. Like on "Merry-Go-Round," I had just gotten out of a cab in New York and it was like, 11:00 in the morning, and I just walked in, had a cup of coffee and rolled tape. It probably would have helped -- I'm not one to do vocal exercises -- to have like, played a little bit first. But it felt right, so we went with it.

R&RD: Using say, "One Wink At A Time" as an example, how does one song come together?

Westerberg: I played bass and guitar on that one, Steve Berlin played sax. I think we might have used one of Chris's drum beats and just put it on a loop. It was written on a piano, oddly enough, and I just came up with the title. It seemed like a nice title, and I just fleshed lyrics out to go with it. Of course, there was a magazine sitting on the piano. One of those special double issues that smell like perfume, and it just kind of took off from there. It only took about 20 minutes to write.

R&RD: When you were touring with Keith Richards...

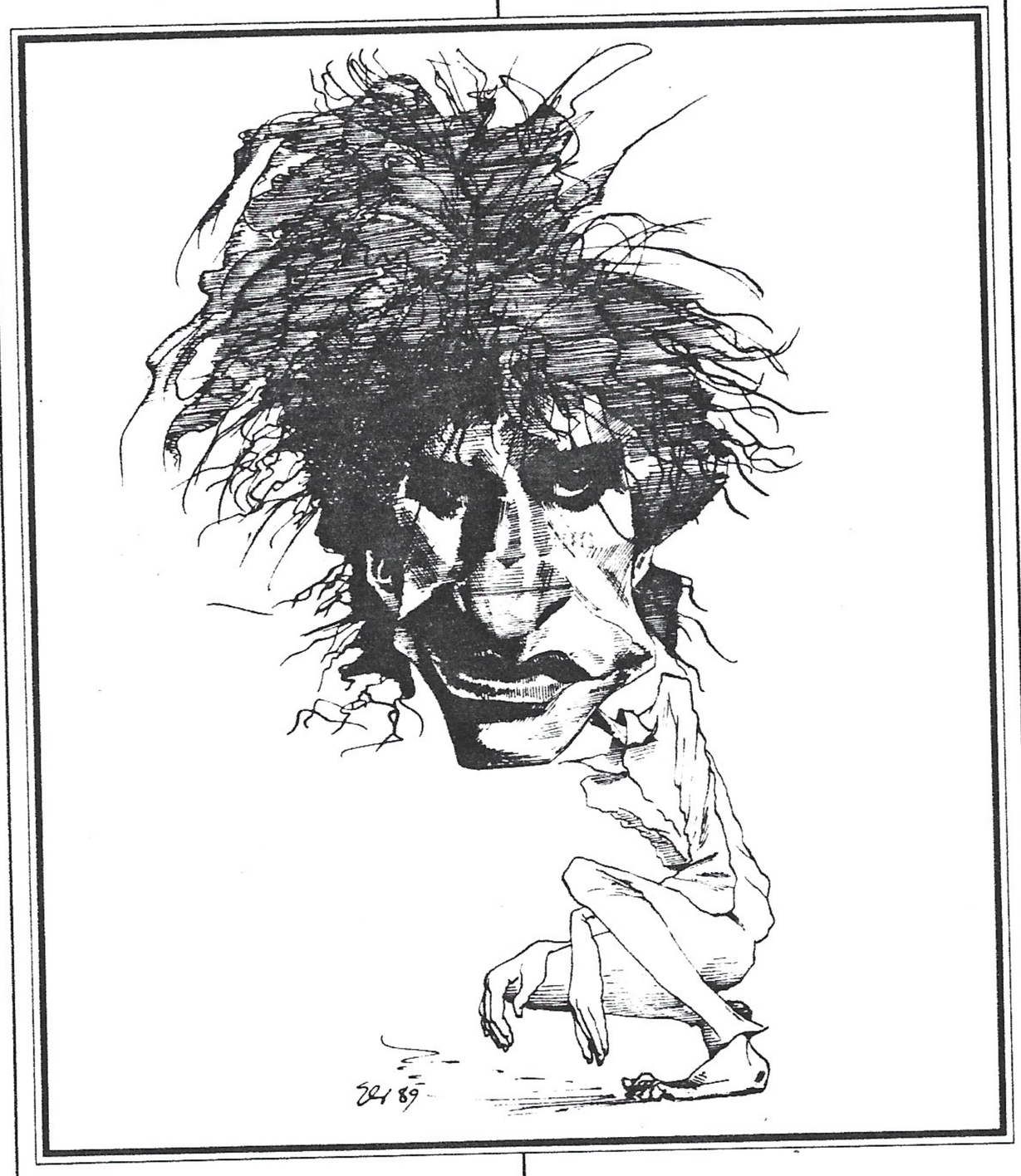
Westerberg: We actually never did tour with him. We played the one gig at the Meadowlands and we did a television show, but we didn't do the tour. There was talk of that, but I think Premiere Talent [the tour's booking agent] thought that in a few markets the sales were down and they would bring the Mats in to kick up a little ruckus, but...I don't know if we were unwilling or unable or if Keith had second thoughts, but it never happened.

R&RD: I was going to ask if you had any conversations with him about your mutual profession, but I guess there wasn't time.

Westerberg: No. I think I complimented him on his shoes, and I lit his cigarette. That was about it.

R&RD: I was recently at a lecture Paul Simon gave out at the Hamptons, on Long Island, where he said he'd only started really listening to lyrics in the past 10 years. Are you big on listening to other people's lyrics, or perhaps of being influenced by writers of other things, like books?

Westerberg: Yeah, I do. I go on sort of these jags where I'll read quite a bit and then I'll go months without reading a book. I read a lot of John Updike over the summer and there's some playwrights that I like; fiction is my favorite. I like Updike. I like short stories. There's a certain feel to this record that could be described as story-esque.



R&RD: Are there records out right now that excite you, or do you mainly listen to the stuff that you liked when you were younger?

Westerberg: I listen to music for different reasons, and I listen to it constantly. I'll listen to some generic, dumb rock and roll in the morning, just to sort of wake up. I listen to the radio mainly and as the day progresses I'll switch to the jazz station, then maybe I'll whip to the hip station to see what's new, but there's nothing right now that I have as a little pet thing. I listened to a lot of Nanci Griffith last year, around this time, as I was writing, hence perhaps some of the songs have that feel. Not that you can tell. But there's nobody right now that's knocking me out, I've got to admit.

R&RD: What do you do when the songs just won't come?

Westerberg: I've gone through several different things, like, if they won't come, I'll drink. I don't do that so much at all anymore. Now if they don't come I'll just leave it alone and try to find something else to do, which is very difficult because when you're in that mode to write and create there's nothing that takes that place. I guess that's where artists fall into that trap of trying to turn their minds off. I've found that doesn't work. Exercise works. Going for a bike ride or walking or maybe visiting a friend or seeing a movie or band or something like that.

R&RD: You mentioned drinking. I heard Bob Dylan stopped by the studio you were working in for a beer?

Westerberg: Yeah. It wasn't like he went out of his way to go to the Replacements bar session, but he was mixing across the hall and he stopped in and he actually hung out a little bit while we were recording one that sounded terrible. And we went through a version of "Like A Rolling Pin" -- unbeknownst to us he was actually there. The other guys saw him, my back was to him at the time, so I went through this godawful version of "Like A Rolling Stone" with no idea that he was in the room. I turned around and it was like, "Paul, meet Bob." I quivered. Asked for the almighty's forgiveness and he just sort of smiled.

R&RD: Was there one single thing that inspired you to be in a rock band, or were there many things?

Westerberg: It was just rock and roll in general. To be able to get away with it was the initial inspiration. The dreams of being in a band are every young boy's dreams and once you get there and get in your little basement group, if you can play to a few people that respond, it is like an addiction. You do tend to crave that and you just take it further and further I guess.

R&RD: Do you have a particular vision that you're following right now that's different from the one you were following in the beginning?

Westerberg: Well, there was no vision in the beginning and I can't say there really is one now, like I want to sell this amount of records or, I want my picture on the cover of this magazine. It's been 11 years that this band has been going and I guess the things that may have seemed unattainable back then or sort of glamorous are now within reach and don't hold a lot. I mean mass appeal and ultra-fame and all that stuff sort of comes with the territory if you want your music to be heard by a lot of people. And I want our music to be heard and liked by as many people as possible. I'm not doing it to be famous, but I realize if fame comes hand-in-hand with that, so be it. I'll try to deal with it.

R&RD: Due to some of the acoustic textures on the album, do you feel you were pushing the band into a different kind of mindset than they might've been in before?

Westerberg: Frankly, I had left the band out of my plans this time. I no longer felt the urge or the need to be one-fourth of a unit and force them to do what I wanted to do. I was writing every one of these songs with the intention of recording them by myself with the help of other musicians, including them if they wanted, and that's kind of the way we went through it. There's a lot of pressure on me to lead the group, and I don't necessarily know if they want to follow. And I felt I had to be responsible only for myself. I didn't want to drag them through my experiments if they didn't want to go. Though if this record flops I'll probably blame them and if it goes big I'll take all the credit. I had just gotten tired of, "What are we going to do, Paul?" "Are you ready to tour, Paul?" "How does this one go, Paul?" It was kind of like you guys occupy yourselves if you can because Paul's going to take a little holiday and make some music. You're welcome to join in.

R&RD: Are you guys all right now?

Westerberg: Sounds like a Free song to me. We were never all right, and to me that's good. I upset the apple cart in a big way and I don't regret it. And it's still not...things aren't cool and I hope we keep them that way. I hope we keep people guessing. If Slim doesn't know what's going on, that's fine, because I don't know what's going on either. As soon as everyone knows, "OK we're going to tour, here, then, then we're going to make this record, we're going to record your song and we're going to do it like this," to me it's boring and I don't want to do that.

R&RD: Every epoch in rock has its own icons, people who are going to be remembered 10, 20 years down the road. Do you see yourself among the bunch for right now?

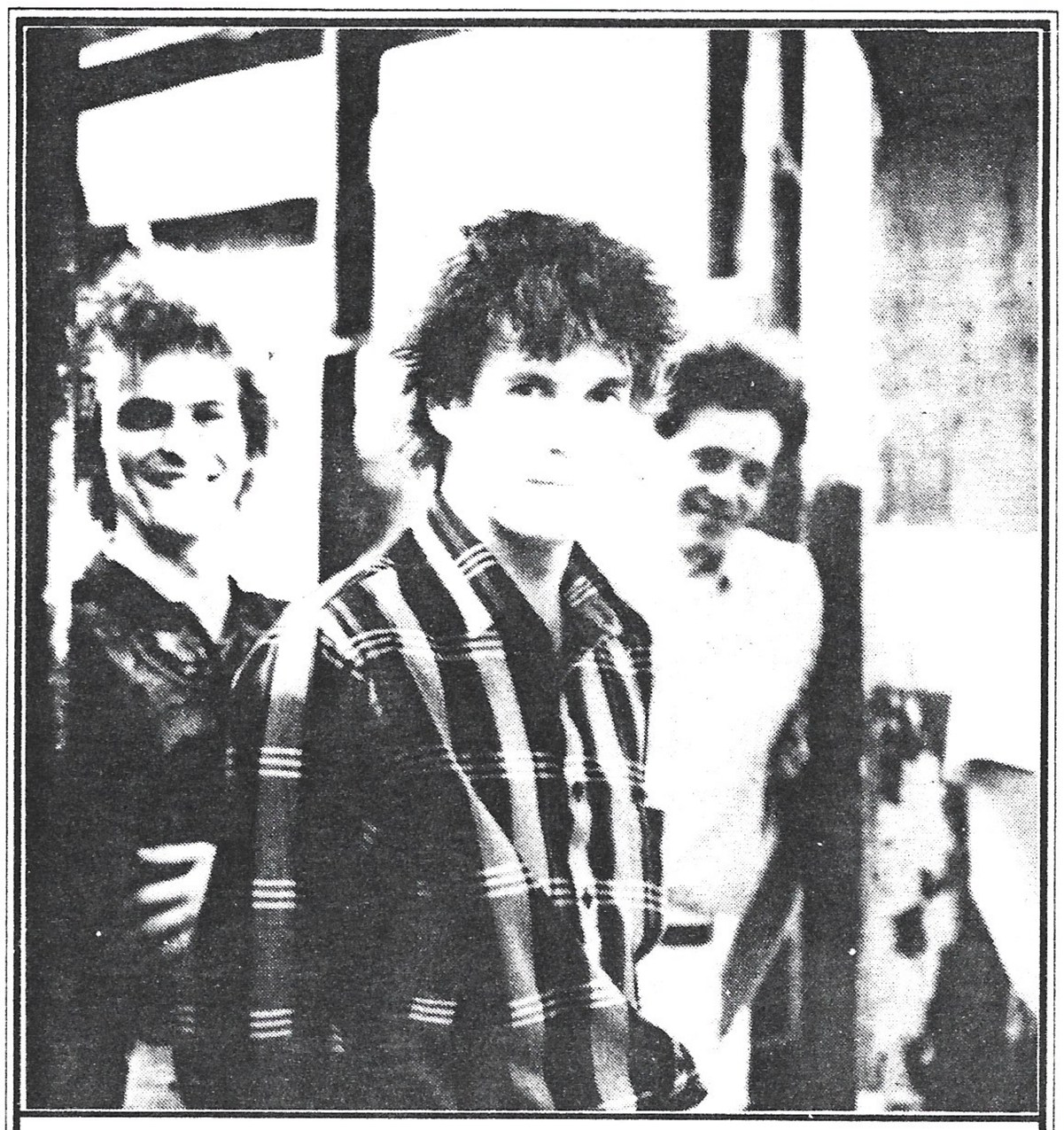
Westerberg: I don't know. That's a big question and it's all up to the members of this thing; I would be willing to bet, if, worse case scenario, we kind of bit the dust or went down, I think a few years time would pass and then people would rediscover us. But for a lot of people the thing that seems attractive about the band or has held this "legendary" status was not necessarily the music. It was the live performance and just the general attitude of the band. I think that if we had broken up in, like, 1986, by now we would have probably had the status of the New York Dolls or something. I mean, if the Dolls had stayed together for 11 years I doubt that people in our day would be seeing them as anything great. They had the smarts to disintegrate early and we just kind of stuck with it. I don't see us as being anybody's idol now. In years to come, another generation, maybe, but not now.

R&RD: Do you think critics and fans appreciate you for the same reason you appreciate you?

Westerberg: I don't know if I appreciate myself at all and, I guess this comes with age, whatever they appreciate, that's fine. If people still want to come up to me and say *Let It Be* was your best record and your new one is good, but I like that one better, that's OK. As long as you like something. Or they like the shirt I wore on *Saturday Night Live*, it's like, fine, that's cool. I'm not on a mission to make everyone see things my way and to understand what I'm saying; it's, you know, take what you want and leave the rest.

R&RD: Does the room exist now for a rock and roll band to do what they want to do or do you really have to kind of go through a stage where you leave the band behind?

Westerberg: It seems to work for some people. I can't think of any band that has stayed together with the same unit for their entire career and been successful. There hasn't been a single solitary one that I can think of. I mean, somebody always dies or quits or is replaced or gets tired and, yeah, we hit that stretch, maybe a few years ago, and it's sort of coming to a head now, where you have to look at the world as a whole. Like, "Is this my life to be playing music with these four guys, 'til I'm too old to stand?" When you think of it that way, it's kind of grim. But it doesn't have to be that way. And I'd like to leave that option open.



"We were never all right...I upset the apple cart in a big way and I don't regret it. And it's still not...things aren't cool and I hope we keep them that way."

R&RD: The audience. The first thing many people heard about you was that you were a great live band...

Westerberg: Or a terrible live band.

R&RD: Or a terrible live band. As far as the audience goes, do you think they still feel the passion audiences during other eras of rock felt about the music? Are they, as a group, still taking note of every little thing you do on-stage or put on record, and devour what you do as a musician?

Westerberg: I don't know. I'm a pretty lousy rock fan. I can't remember the last time I stood in an arena setting and watched a band and was blown away. I suppose as the years pass and generations become more MTV-esque and you need something new every four seconds and you can't even watch television anymore because you've got that damn clicker in your hand, I would imagine that people's attention spans have definitely shortened and I guess that makes it more difficult for a group to go over without the use of elaborate lighting, which is something that we've never really been into, but...um...I'm rambling. If you can get something out of that, then you're a better man than I am.

R&RD: If you could spend some time with someone you respect musically, who would it be?

Westerberg: That's a good one. I guess I would like to hang out with Nanci Griffith, and also I would like to hang out with Hubert Sumlin, a blues guitar player, someone who has been through it all and could spin a tale or two and maybe I could cop a lick from.

R&RD: Final question. A two-parter. Can you remember the moment you first said, "Wow, what's happening on that record?" and do you think you've ever captured that very indefinable "it" on any of your records?

Westerberg: Probably it was a mistake. There are lots of them, where somebody played the wrong note. Those are the things we'd always play over and over, because for us, we always assumed they were on purpose and you only realize what it was when you finally record yourself and discover, yeah, guys make mistakes and everybody and their brother takes them out except for bands who want people to know that they're human. It was probably "Cut Across Shorty" on Rod Stewart's Gasoline Alley, where they went to the wrong chord too soon. Something like that. And yes, we have made mistakes on our records and left them in and turned them up. Every record has examples. On the new record, on "All Shook Down," on one side of the speaker you can hear a door opening and the guitar tuner walking in right in the middle of the vocal take. Which is kind of neat. ❖